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Author(s): Dorothy Burr Thompson

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Fig. 1. Athens. The Temple of Hephaistos from the east. This temple, formerly called the Theseum, stands above the market-place on a hill where the metal-workers followed their trade. Excavators have found that in antiquity its aspect was not so bleak as it is today, but was softened by a small formal garden. Agora Excavations photo.

ANCIENT GARDENS IN GREECE AND ITALY

By Dorothy Burr Thompson

HERE AND THERE IN THE LYRICS OF ARISTOPHANES, we catch a glimpse of flowers, as on the moist meadows of Marathon, or of trees, as they whisper together over the heads of the youths at the Academy, but these are but incidental references. The classical Greeks took their flowers gladly, but they did not expend much energy on the cultivation of Nature. What they did was to humanize her ways as much as possible. They set off architecture by formal planting in the manner of the older empires.

They probably learned most from Persia. We read how the Spartan Lysander, on visiting the Persian king, Cyrus, marvelled at the orderly plan of the garden that the king had himself designed. But even more did the Greek marvel at the fact that the king, despite his fine costume, his perfume and jewelry, had sweated himself in its cultivation. Such an English passion for horticulture was not in the nature of the Greeks.

Hellenic cities, cramped within their fortifications,

had no room for private gardens. As in the empires, only the well-to-do could afford them. Xenophon describes such a park that he endowed with a tithe of the booty that he brought back from his Persian travels. When he dedicated this booty to the goddess, Ar-

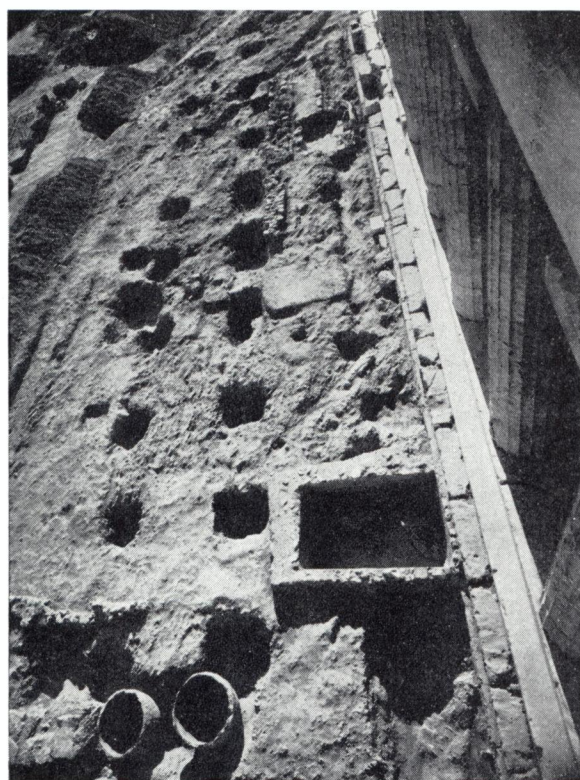


Fig. 2. The surface of the hill along the south side of the temple of Hephaistos, as seen from the roof. The square cuttings formed two rows aligned with the columns. The front of the temple was left clear. (The clay jars at the bottom of the picture, and the square water-basin just above them with late burials lying in it, have nothing to do with the garden but belonged to the monastery of the mediaeval church.) Agora Excavations photo.

temis, he built her a temple near Olympia and surrounded it with a park in which he evidently took great pride. It contained meadows and wooded hills, where pigs, goats, cattle, and horses could be bred. "Round the temple itself, there has been set a plantation of fruit-trees, which produce fruit to eat in all the appropriate seasons" (*Anabasis* 3.5.7-13). The people of the neighborhood joined gaily in hunting game to be

sacrificed at the festival. Visitors camped in the sanctuary while their animals browsed on the pasture of the goddess. Their masters were provided with barley, bread, wine, and other dainties also drawn from her bounty. Such lively occasions in the temple parks were a true expression of the easy, democratic way in which the Greeks have ever enjoyed the country—hunting, picnicing, playing games, but never sentimentalizing over the beauties of nature.

Although Greek excavators have recently discovered the temple that Xenophon built, they can scarcely hope to find its park. In fact, so far only one temple garden has been excavated and that is in Athens itself.



Fig. 3. One of the cuttings in the rock on the hill-top as it looked when partially excavated. A pot, set well below the ancient ground level, is visible in the ancient filling. This pot is shown in Fig. 4. Agora Excavations photo.

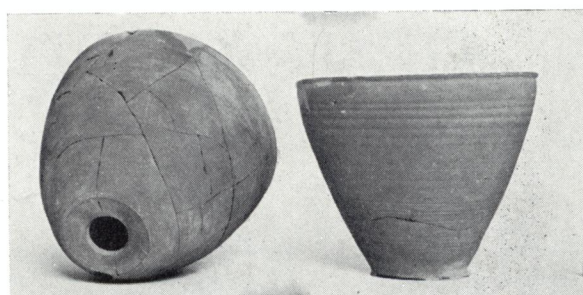


Fig. 4. Flower pots from the temple garden. The pot on the right side is that shown in the cutting, Fig. 3. In the left hand pot, the hole in the bottom was made on the wheel while the clay was soft. Agora Excavations photo.

On the low hill that overlooks the Athenian Agora still stands a Doric temple, long known as the Theseum (FIGURE 1). Both the temple and the terrace on which it stands have been studied by the American excavators

and have been shown to be sacred to Hephaistos. As we proceeded to clear away the little earth that overlay the rocky hill, square cuttings began to appear in the surface of the terrace to the south of the temple. They were pits, about three Greek feet square and deep, neatly aligned with the columns of the colonnade. We could make out two main rows, about five feet apart, with indications of other more shallow cuttings. These rows extended along the sides and back of the temple, leaving the east end open. From the temple roof as we looked down, the pattern was clear (FIGURE 2).

These cuttings were filled with earth; some of them had not been disturbed since antiquity. We dug them carefully, uncertain as to what we would find. We were surprised. In many of the cuttings, as much as nineteen inches below the ancient ground level, we found pots set neatly in the centre (FIGURE 3). Frankly puzzled, we pulled out the pots. They were plain, unglazed, rather coarse pots. We turned them over. In the bottom of each was a hole, cut on the wheel while the clay was still damp (FIGURE 4). They were nothing

but flower pots! Evidently the temple gardeners had practised "layering," as described by Cato in his treatise on agriculture. In order to help a new slip to take firm root the gardener pulls a branch through a pot,

then packs the pot with earth and ties it to the parent tree. After a year or so, when the branch has taken root, the gardener cuts off the shoot below the pot and sets the pot, cracked, deep down in the earth where he wishes the slip to grow. A cistern near the Temple of Hephaistos evidently provided the water to keep these nurslings alive.

Since we found no roots, we cannot say exactly what plants grew in this garden. But in view of the limited space, it must have been only small shrubs, such as myrtle, laurel, or possibly vines. We can restore two main rows, making four walks, laid out symmetrically much in the Egyptian manner. Probably smaller beds ran beside the walks and vines clambered up the precinct wall. This garden seems to have been laid out in the early Hellenistic period, and kept

up until the first century after Christ. To one looking westward from the Agora, this shady precinct might

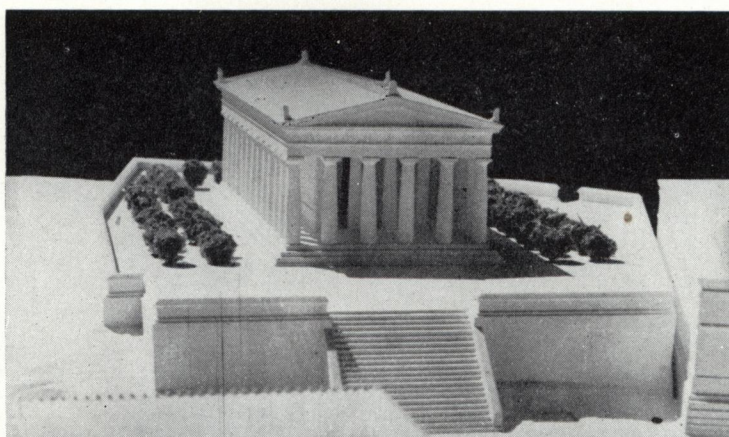


Fig. 5. A model, showing the Temple of Hephaistos in its garden as it looked in the time of Augustus. Shrubs have been restored in the cuttings; other planting which probably existed has not been indicated. Agora Excavations photo.

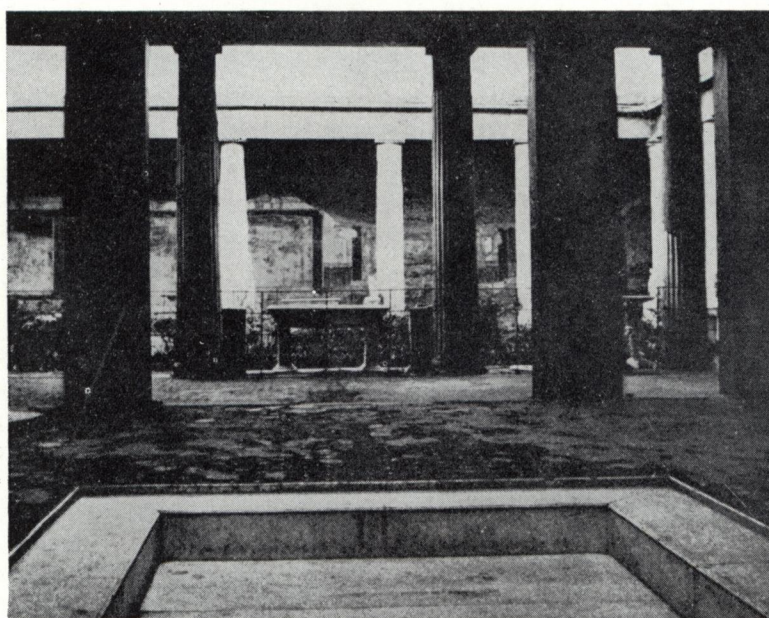


Fig. 6. Pompeii. The House of the Vettii as it appeared to the visitor on entering the building. In the foreground lies the impluvium of the dark atrium; in the background, the sunny peristyle formed an open-air sitting-room for the family. Photo: Nash, Roman Towns, plate 44.

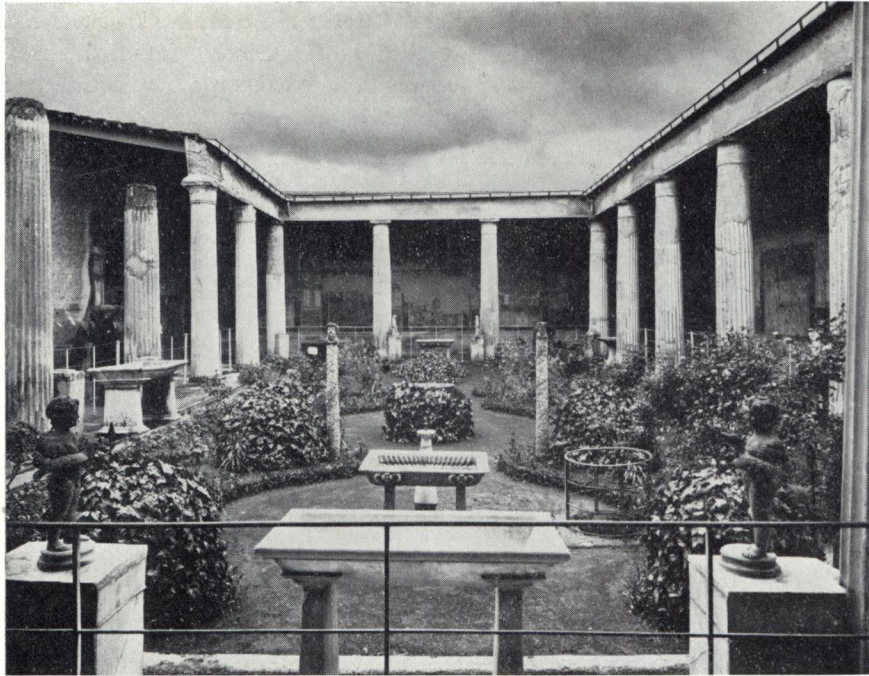


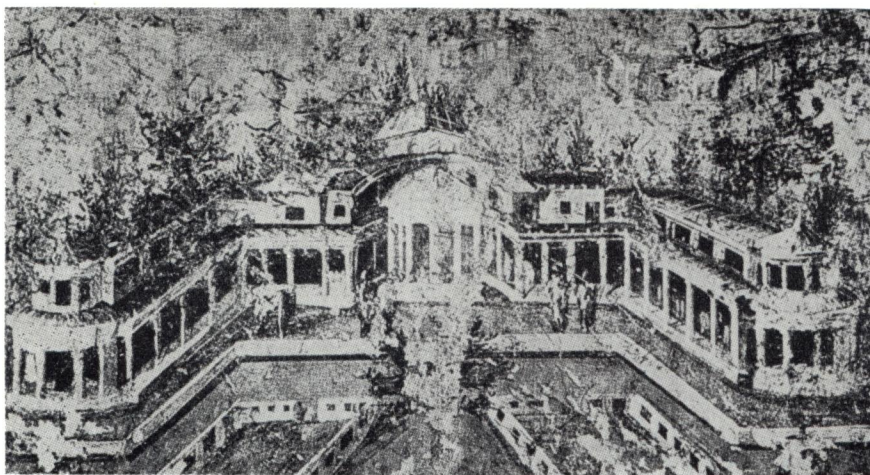
Fig. 7. The garden and peristyle of the House of the Vettii at Pompeii. It was laid out on an axial plan, watered by fountains and decorated with small beds of flowers, and with sculpture and furniture of marble. This sheltered yet sunny place could be used at almost any time of year. Anderson photo.

have reminded the imaginative of the Garden of the Hesperides, where Herakles had triumphed, as in the pediment of the temple just above (FIGURE 5).

Larger gardens and public parks were laid out in

their master's habit of strolling on the *peripatoi*, or garden paths. In his pragmatic way he could thus illustrate his points by reference to the plant and animal life about him. Here, rather than in a stuffy class-room,

Fig. 8. Pompeii. A wall painting, showing a villa in a Roman resort. Two-storeyed colonnades flank the approach to a semicircular entrance. In the foreground lie fenced small gardens, planted with shrubs. Behind rises a hilly park covered with other colonnades and buildings. Photo: Rostovtzeff, Rome, plate XXIX.



the suburbs of Athens, outside the walls, but nothing suggests that they were very ambitious undertakings. They seem to have been pleasant areas, neatly planted, but not elaborate. The Academy was thus parked by Kimon; in later days, according to Greek custom, students set up housekeeping in the near-by grove of the Muses. Epicurus' famous garden, in contrast with the buildings in which we often teach aesthetics, was an appropriate setting for his creed of enjoyment. Plato's and Theophrastus' gardens, though begun as private parks, were soon overrun in the gregarious Greek way with followers and scholars. The gymnasia of the Lyceum and Cynosarges, fine preserves full of trees, were the scene for battles of the wits as well as for cavalry skirmishes. Aristotle's followers, indeed, got their nickname, the "Peripatetics," from the students, invigorated by gentle activity in the open air, examined the universe—and found it good. Their philosophy may well have derived something of its sanity from the orderliness of the garden plan on which they walked. "Their ways were ways of pleasantness; and all their paths were peace."

IN THE BUSTLING HELLENISTIC world, more technical skill was lavished on horticulture. The Greeks wrote treatises on gardening. Cities, particularly in Sicily and Italy, boasted of splendid parks. Kings took up the craze. Attalos III of Pergamon, for instance, followed

the Persian custom of gardening himself—but he grew only drugs and poisons. Hieron II of Syracuse took his garden to sea with him. On a royal ship as luxurious as a modern liner, he built not only magnificent living-quarters, a bathroom, a library, a picture-gallery, and a stable, but also a *peripatos* under arbors cunningly contrived. Water was piped into garden beds along the decks and into large clay jars, which were filled with earth. White ivy and grape vines grown in these jars were trained to form arbors over the decks, surely a more agreeable shade than that produced by a flapping awning.

When the Romans became masters of the eastern Mediterranean, in the first century B.C., they brought back to once-austere Italy the arts of cooking and of landscape-gardening. Italy, more fertile than Greece, had always esteemed the blessings of Flora; as the country grew richer, homesteads were turned into villas. Despite the wail of the moralists that flowers were driving vegetables from the market, the tired businessmen of Rome spend weeks in their country-houses, rejoicing in the less productive aspects of rural life. Vergil often expresses their mood,

*"O, fortunatos nimium,
sua si bona norint, Agri-
colas—"*

but scarcely as a true "dirt farmer."

Many Roman gardens have been excavated, especially in that region which the eruption of Vesuvius in A.D. 79 covered and pre-

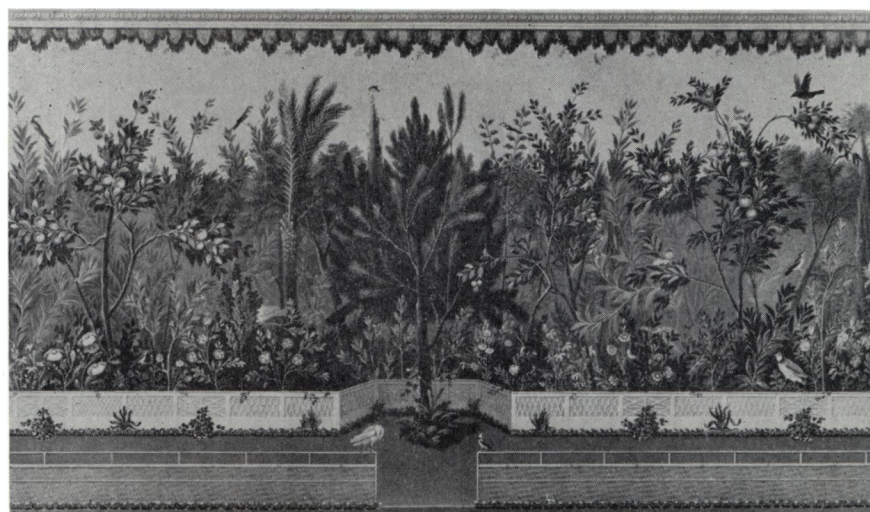


Fig. 9. Rome. A wall painting in the villa of the Empress Livia, showing a garden surrounded by a fence and broad paths. Flowers, fruits and trees were all drawn from memory or imagination but the effect is convincing and refreshing. Photo: Ant. Denk., I, plate 11.

served so effectively for us. The Italian excavators have developed a fine technique for identifying the plants that grew in these gardens. Where the ash hardened like concrete around the stems of the trees or shrubs,

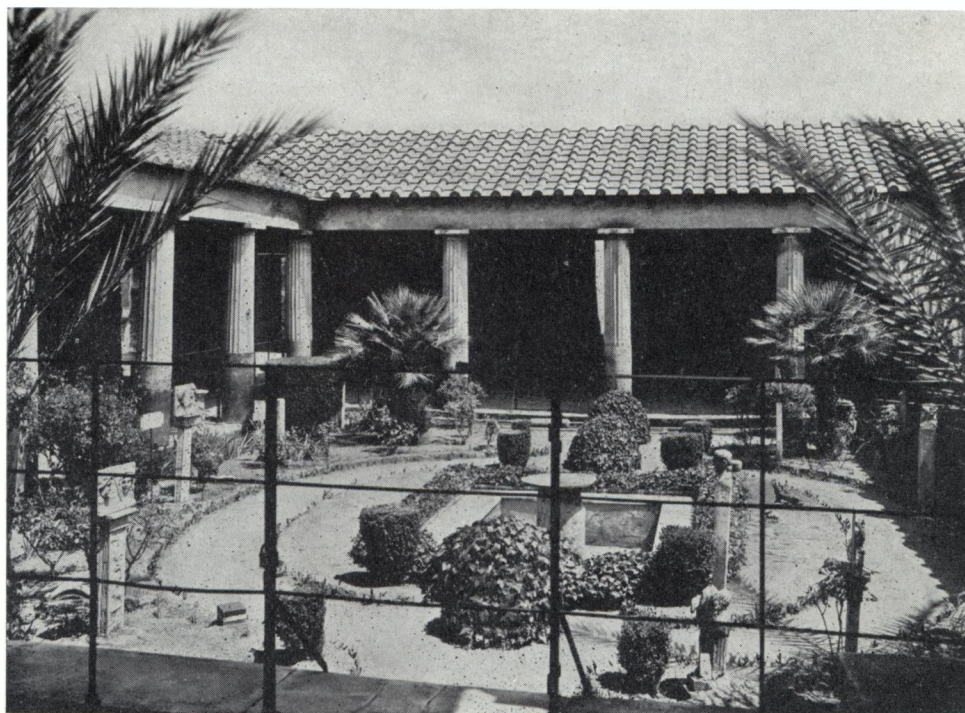


Fig. 10. Pompeii. House of the Gilded Cupids. This garden was laid out on a circular plan focussed on a square water basin into which a fountain played.

it acted like a mould. When the living matter had rotted, a perfect impression was preserved. By pouring plaster into these cavities as they find them, the excavators obtain casts from which botanists are able to identify the plants. These the archaeologists replant so that to-day we see the gardens growing as they did 1900 years ago.

Let us take for example the garden in the well-known House of the Vettii in Pompeii, which is representative of the larger houses of the latest period of the city. As one entered the house through the front door, one looked across the water-basin of the atrium directly into the peristyle, or colonnaded garden. The

was a round marble basin; at the sides, oblong tanks. Water poured into the tanks from fountain figures that stood beside them, as for example, from the beaks of the ducks held by the boys shown in FIGURE 7. Thus the sound of splashing waters refreshed the ears of the family as they sat in adjacent rooms. This type of garden is the commonest in Pompeii; it is ever contracted and formal, tending to be very much like an open conservatory.

Much grander gardens were laid out by the richer Romans in their estates in the hills or beside the Bay of Naples. Pliny has described them vividly for us and we have found traces of them in various parts of Italy.

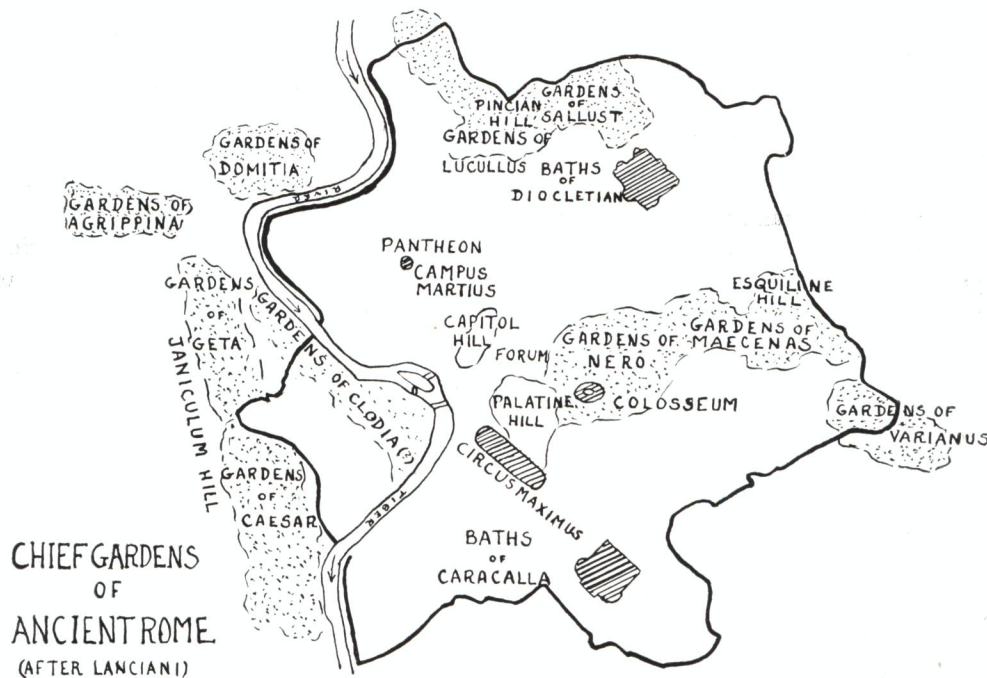


Fig. 11. Rome. Plan, showing the location of parks and gardens. The most important are labelled, but the site of many is unknown. Seventy of these parks were on record by the end of the Roman Empire. Plan after Lanciani, *Excav. of Rome*, fig. 150.

atrium, which served as an entrance hall, was dark and cool; beyond it the peristyle provided an inviting contrast of bright sunlight playing on the color of the shrubbery and flowers (FIGURE 6).

In the House of the Vettii, the peristyle was surrounded by a colonnade where the members of the family could stroll or sit protected from wind and sun. The area open to the sky was neatly bordered by low shrubs and flowers. In the mid part, stone tables and sculpture set a formal note. At each of the four corners

These huge estates were parked. Large rambling houses were characterized by wings set with colonnades, sometimes two stories in height (FIGURE 8). Thus the owner might face the sun, the woods, or the sea, according to his mood. Water was piped in from the hills, to trickle down cascades or to form lakes where they were desired. These lakes and streams were often named after places famous in literature, such as Nile, Peneus, or Canopus. Small theatres, music halls and baths, tennis courts and swimming-pools were strategi-

cally placed and guest-houses gave additional space and offered the owner a retreat when the servants at the festivals grew unbearably noisy.

The landscaping of these estates was treated on broad lines. The park proper was stocked with deer, game, pigeons, peacocks, and even nightingales. Planting was arranged to lead the eye from formality to natural growth, which was regarded as "almost" as beautiful. Planting was laid out in symmetrical compositions to lend an architectural background to pagaeants. Terraces were used in the Mesopotamian manner, to give vertical movement. Shrubs, rather than flowers, were favored, especially those, like box, that lent themselves to clipping into fantastic forms, such as a wild beast hunt or a sea fight. Paths were laid out, as Vergil recommends in the *Georgics*, in straight lines, like rows of soldiers, to give equal light and space to the plants.

Not only did the Romans enjoy landscape out-of-doors, but they brought it within their four walls. By ingenious perspectives they painted illusory parks and gardens in frescoes upon the walls of the city houses. The Empress Livia, wife of Augustus, treated the walls of a cool underground room, unbroken by windows, as an indoor garden. The effect of these paintings was much like that of our modern "picture-windows" that seem to bring the outside world into intimate relation with that within. Here the Empress could rest on a hot summer day, surrounded by a thick growth behind a woven fence (FIGURE 9). Realistic as this painting appears, it is not botanically accurate. A tree with citrus leaves bears on one side pomegranates, on the other, quinces. The poppies are violet. Here is a gracious fairy-land for the indulgence of dreams, doubtless sentimental, undisturbed by sound or insect.

Roman gardens, then, were really treated as *salons*. Those outside were developed as architectural settings, those inside as illusions of air and space, in same mood in which we use mirrors to-day. The house and garden were interwoven into a new, somewhat fantastic, architectural conception.

Not all these grand parks lay outside the city limits. Many began within Rome as the private pleasure-grounds of millionaires, but as taxation increased they were turned over to the state for the delight of the emperor and of the people. The names of seventy such

"Horti" are known by the end of the Roman empire (FIGURE 11). The earliest was laid out on the Pincian Hill in 60 B.C. by Lucullus, who was famous also for his feasts. These gardens were so fine that the Empress Messalina coveted them and committed murder to acquire them. But she received her due punishment, for she met her own death there.

Julius Caesar's great estate, which lay on the right bank of the Tiber, was the site of the house where he entertained Cleopatra in 44 B.C. He set a fashion by willing these gardens to the Roman people. Maecenas, the patron of Horace and the friend of Augustus, reclaimed a slum area for his park on the Esquiline. He filled in what had been an old graveyard where sorcerers used to rip up graves in order to find bones for the confection of love-potions. It was probably here that the first warm water swimming-pool in Rome was built.

But in extent none of these estates equalled that of the Emperor Nero, which reached from the Palatine to the Esquiline and was centered on an artificial lake that was later filled in to provide a site for the Flavian amphitheater. Here Nero built his gigantic palace, the Golden House, where he held rose-scented banquets beneath a revolving ceiling that showered roses upon his astonished guests. Tacitus praises the skill of the engineers who laid out in the midst of Rome fields, lakes, woods, and wide vistas. Even more interesting to lovers of Latin literature are the gardens of Clodia by the river. Here that infamous beauty, immortalized by Catullus as "Illa Lesbia, Lesbia illa" gave swimming parties over which Cicero shook his head, remarking, "Quot complexus, quot osculationes!"

When the Gauls sacked the villas and ruined the gardens of Rome, they did not entirely destroy the Italian passion for an ordered landscape. The mediæval cloister-gardens carried on the tradition of the peristyle. The Renaissance noblemen rediscovered the Roman conception of the park and attempted to outdo it. Whoever walks to-day in the estates of the great Renaissance villas of Rome or in their French or English imitations will appreciate that they are essentially classical creations. That Graeco-Roman gesture, which so graciously bade Nature submit to the ways of Man, held the art of landscape gardening under its spell down to the new conceptions of the present.